

THE NEXT BATTLE

Should women be barred from combat?

says Donnelly. "[But] combat means deliberate, offensive action. It's not the same as being in harm's way."

Already there

Though some servicewomen in Iraq work as nurses and clerks, many are routinely in combat situations. Many female soldiers say they've proved they're up to the task both physically and emotionally.

"You can't tell me I'm not being shot at," Army Lt. Col. Cheri Provancha told *The Washington Post*. "You can't tell me I can't handle combat."

The Iraq war is far different from previous wars. Roadside bombs, rockets, and suicide bombers target everyone, from military personnel to civilians. Like many servicewomen in Iraq, Provancha has faced it all. Officially putting female troops in support roles is just creative wording, says Lt. Col. Bob Roth of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division. "You just want someone to feel better by saying we don't allow women into dangerous situations," he told *The Washington Post*.

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IN ACTION: Female soldiers search suspects in Iraq. More than 300 women have been wounded.



AMERICAN WOMEN HAVE served in wars since the American Revolution.

During that war's battle of Fort Mifflin, Margaret Corbin took over her husband's post at a cannon after he was killed.

She was the first woman awarded a disability pension by Congress for being injured during military service.

Today, female troops make up about 15 percent of the U.S. military's active-duty force. Since 2003, 48 women have died serving in Iraq, and more than 300 have been wounded. In Iraq, female troops patrol highways, pilot helicopters, and search suspects. But there's one thing women can't do: fight in combat. Congress has long barred women from engaging in direct ground combat. They are, however, permitted to act in "supporting" combat roles.

Many soldiers, both female and male, say the policy of keeping women out of combat is unrealistic. Some people

favor changing the rule or abolishing it altogether. At the same time, a new law requires the Defense Department to report to Congress on female troop assignments. The law gives Congress more oversight regarding women's roles in the military.

Not on the front lines

"The American people have never wanted to have women in combat," says U.S. Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

There are practical reasons that women shouldn't be on the battlefield, some people say. Pregnancy, for instance, may prevent a woman from being deployed or cause her to be sent home. Women tend to be physically smaller than men, which can make it hard for them to bear combat equipment. "Modern body armor alone weighs 25 pounds," Elaine Donnelly of the Center for Military Readiness told MSNBC. "Even in current noncombat training, women suffer debilitating bone stress fractures and other injuries at rates double those of men."

Women soldiers in Iraq are certainly putting their lives at risk,

What do you think?

Should female troops be allowed in combat?
Let us know!

E-mail us! letters@teennewsweek.com

